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THE RECORDING OF PRECEDENTS, A PAINTING BY JOHN LA FARGE, IN THE NEW CAPITOL, ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

JOHN LA FARGE

AN APPRECIATION

BY ANNA SEATON-SCHMIDT

NO one can study the history of American art and not realize the important influence of John La Farge upon its development.

Born in 1835, he was one of the first to recognize the necessity of cultivating our long-neglected instinct for Beauty, without which it is impossible to produce a great national art. By his personal devotion to all things lovely, by his writings, his paintings, his glass-work, he has striven, during almost sixty years, to develop and ennoble our art conception.

The child of French parents, he grew up in an atmosphere of artistic culture rarely found in the homes of those early days.

"I was only six when I had my first drawing lesson. My grandfather, a miniature painter, had studied in Paris and

believed in the thorough technical drill of the French Schools. I can still remember my disappointment over that first lesson! An imaginative child, I had expected to draw knights and ladies, or houses and animals; in a word, I had eagerly looked forward to *making a picture!*

"My grandfather told me to draw a straight line, then another and another. For weeks I was permitted to do nothing else. What hard work it was to learn to shade by drawing lines close together! I was such a little fellow that my lessons seemed terribly irksome, yet I never thought of rebelling—I simply continued to draw straight lines. That early discipline has been of incalculable service in all my work.

"No, my parents did not expect me to be an artist; drawing was by them con-



CHRIST AND NICODEMUS

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JOHN LA FARGE

ORIGINAL CARTOON FOR PAINTING IN TRINITY CHURCH, BOSTON

sidered a necessary part of my general education.

"Later I was sent to the Jesuits to pursue my classical studies. While there I happily became the special care of a very learned priest. He simply poured knowledge into me as one would pour something into an empty box! He loved to impart all that he knew and I learned much of history and of life in foreign lands."

When La Farge finished college his parents sent him to Europe for a broader culture than he could obtain at home. Until that time he had seen very few paintings, and the wonder and glory of the galleries in Paris took a deep hold on his imagination.

Again he "wanted to make pictures,"

and so, merely for his personal pleasure, he entered the studio of Thomas Couture. This master at once recognized his great talent and advised him to work alone.

"Your place is not among these students. They have no ideas, they only imitate me. *They are all trying to be little Coutures.*"

He therefore gave himself up to the delight of studying the Old Masters, making many careful drawings of the pictures which he loved. But his passion for travel did not permit him to remain long in Paris. He must visit all the countries of the world. It was this keen desire to see, to know for himself, that enabled La Farge to lay the foundations of a culture which few artists possess.

On his return to New York he took up

the study of law. Painting had appealed to him as a delightful pastime, not as a profession. He still found time for sketching, as well as for much reading of poetry and mystic philosophy.

"No one has struggled more against his destiny than I, nor did I, for many years, fully acquiesce in being a painter, though I learned the methods and studied the problems of my art. I had hoped to find some other mode of life, some other way of satisfying the desire for a contemplation of truth—unbiased, free and detached."

These words accentuate what John La Farge has clearly expressed through his art—that he is a searcher after truth, not only truth as revealed in physical nature, but the profounder spiritual truth which underlies all creation.

His first recognition as an artist came from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who in a small picture, sent for exhibition to England, perceived his kinship with the mystical pre-Raphaelites and immediately welcomed him into their Brotherhood.*

Time has proved the wisdom of the poet-painter in placing La Farge among the Italian Masters.

He shares their breadth of vision, their many-sided knowledge—in a word, the universality of their genius. The deep religious feeling manifested in many of his mural decorations allies him to the artists of the early Renaissance, while his impassioned color-compositions proclaim him the direct inheritor of the great Venetians—the inheritor, not the copyist, for the work of John La Farge is absolutely individual. With a heart open to all beauty, his large serene vision embraces every aspect of art and makes it his own.

In his Japanese pictures he brings us the atmosphere of Japan, while no one except Lafcadio Hearn has even given us such exquisite color-poems of the Southern Seas.

He absorbed the life, the people, the

character of those far away islands, and in his studies of men and women, palpitating with life, he has brought back to us the very breath of the Orient.

Before our Centennial Exhibition mural decoration was almost unknown in America. When La Farge insisted that painting and architecture were sister arts and should never have been divorced, that decoration should become an integral part of the building itself, no one comprehended or appreciated his point of view. He at last became so disheartened by this lack of perception and the constant refusal of his decorative designs that he determined to devote himself to landscape painting.

Fortunately for the development of our mural decoration, H. H. Richardson happened to see some of his rejected designs.

This architect was just completing Trinity Church, Boston, and immediately engaged La Farge to take charge of its decorations.

The obstacles which he encountered seem almost unbelievable, so far have our art conditions advanced since 1876!

"The materials of the trades of decoration were purposely bad, because, as their chief explained to me, the fashions in decorations changed every few years, *and were helped to change by the profitable decay of colors.* I had to fight hand to hand with commerce.

"Moreover, there was no money for the suitable scaffolding of this big building. * * * We had to face material conditions that were difficult and not devoid of personal danger.

"Above all, I had been given but *four months* in which to decide on my subjects, make my designs, engage my assistants, and carry the entire work to completion. * * * At the end we painted both night and day and were only able to guess at what might be the result when the scaffolding should come down."

The impressiveness of these decorations

*Mr. La Farge has told me how much that first encouragement meant to him. "I resolved always to try and encourage young artists—helping them to accomplish and work out their talent"—a resolution nobly kept. Often when overwhelmed with commissions, when every moment was worth its weight in gold, he has neglected his own work to criticize and advise a young painter or decorator.



"THE ASCENSION"

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JOHN LA FARGE

PAINTING IN THE CHANCEL OF THE CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION, NEW YORK

was further injured by the hanging of an immense chandelier, which was out of all harmony with the lines of the architecture and decorations; and the insertion of garish, mediocre glass in many of the windows. An English critic has said that "Trinity Church is an epitome of the contrasts of America; the aspirations and the bad taste, the splendid gifts and the wilful neglect, the great opportunities and the marring haste."

But the main thing was that the mural painting had been done at all, that the seed had been sown which was to produce such splendid flowering in the recent decoration of many of our public buildings.

Scarcely was Trinity completed when the artist received the commission to decorate St. Thomas's Church in New York. Here not only the painting, but every

detail of the architectural decoration, was placed under his supervision. He made all the designs for wood and stone work and even did part of the wood carving.

These years of almost ceaseless toil undermined a constitution far from robust. A complete rest was pronounced necessary and a trip to Japan prescribed.

While there he made studies for the now famous background in his mural decoration for Ascension Church, New York. The marvelous atmospheric effects of Japan lend themselves in a peculiarly fitting manner to his interpretation of this Bible story. Misty color-vapors rise from and cling about the green slopes of the mountains, while clouds of opalescent hue, of every gradation of prismatic color, roll toward the ascending figure of Christ and envelop His encircling angels.

From the Divine Head radiates a



MADONNA AND CHILD

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JOHN LA FARGE

heavenly glory in bars of dazzling light. Below, His mother stretches her empty arms toward Him and groups of apostles and disciples gaze toward the upborne floating figure.

In this work the artist has convinced us that Biblical subjects can still be painted in the deeply religious spirit of the fifteenth century, joined with that faithful translation of nature and superb mastery of color which places this painting among the masterpieces of the French Impressionists.

When La Farge found that the stained-glass windows in many churches interfered with the effect of such decorations he felt obliged to undertake not only their design, but their manufacture.

He believed that there were undiscovered possibilities in opal glass, and that modern processes might bring about combinations of opalescent colors unknown to medieval glass-makers.

The amazing success of his experiments needs no retelling. What is less well known is his patient struggle of months and years to conquer, not alone the ignorance, but the will power of his workmen; to inspire them with his enthusiastic belief in ultimate victory. Their intelligent co-operation was absolutely necessary to the accomplishment of his

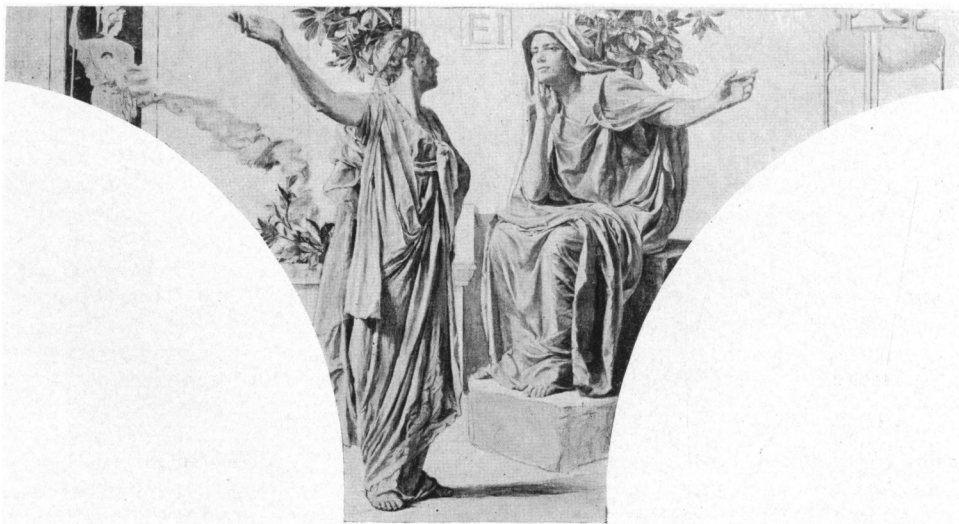
work and that could be procured only by individual interest and enthusiasm as to the results of their labors. In converting so many of his workingmen into artist artisans he has happily insured the beauty of our future stained glass.

"My idea of encouragement is that of placing great responsibilities on those who are worthy," Mr. La Farge has said, adding: "One of the lessons taught us every day by Oriental art, especially by the art of Japan, is that there is a place for every one in art, provided that he keeps entirely within his capacities and his knowledge."

His tenacity of purpose in the face of overwhelming difficulties has been the most potent factor in the successful life-work of John La Farge. It has enabled him to conquer many technical problems both in mural painting and the making of stained glass that have materially aided the development of our national art.

I can not better express my appreciation of his character than by quoting his description of an artist of the Early Renaissance:

"A many-sided man, a man who pondered over the mysteries of life here and hereafter; a man who had a great purpose in his work and who loved it, who believed that in giving his best to art he was fulfilling the law of God."



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"LYCURGUS"